

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE STANDARD OF FEELINGS

Doy Moyer

There is a common sentiment among some believers that Scripture is not adequate enough as an authoritative standard for what we believe and practice. Those who argue this, however, are not without some kind of standard. If they reject Scripture as a final standard, they are still using a standard. The problem they now have, however, is in defining their standard and legitimately appealing to it.

Some will say that the standard is Jesus, others the Holy Spirit, and still others general sentiments or feelings. The problem is not that the standard is something other than Jesus (He is the Standard); the problem is that we are prone to make up our own versions of Jesus and attribute our own personal preferences to Him. We might ask, “What would Jesus do?” This sounds good, but if we fabricate what Jesus would do in order to support our own agenda, then we have merely used the name of Jesus to rubber stamp our own will. Jesus would ask, “Why do you call Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?” (Luke 6:46)

The same holds true with claiming the Holy Spirit without actually providing the evidence that the Holy Spirit has chosen them as a conduit for revealing His will. The apostles worked signs to demonstrate that they were from God (2 Cor. 12:12). When people today say that the Spirit is leading them, what evidence will they provide to prove this assertion? Again, their standard ends up being their own will, attributing to the Spirit whatever feels right to them.

Are we arguing that Jesus or the Spirit is not the standard? Not at all. The reality is that we cannot say that Jesus is the standard while ignoring flatly what He said (cf. John 12:48). We cannot claim that the Spirit is leading us while ignoring what the Spirit has revealed (1 Cor. 2:10-13). This is why Scripture is important. We aren’t worshipping the Bible when we appeal to it; we are honoring the fact that Jesus has spoken, the Spirit has revealed, and the Scriptures are the result.

Paul wrote, “For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe” (1 Thess. 2:13).

When someone uses a standard other than Scripture (as the word of God), how can we know what the standard is? How do we consider it in any objective sense? When people argue that they are acting with God’s approval, yet cannot point to a Scripture to show this, to what will they appeal as their evidence that God approves it? We have seen discussions go something like this.

Person A: "The Spirit must lead us, not just the Bible."

Person B: "How do you know the Spirit is leading?"

Person A: "By looking at the fruit of the Spirit."

Person B: "How do you know what the fruit of the Spirit is?"

Of course, to know what the fruit of the Spirit is, one must go back to the Bible (Gal. 5:22-24) or invent whatever feels right to them. Critics of so-called "biblicism" fuss about differing interpretations of Scripture, but what about differing interpretations of the fruit of the Spirit, whatever that is? Who decides this?

Some have used Paul's point in Romans 5:5 to argue the same, since "the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us." The reasoning is essentially that the Spirit guides our hearts, and if we can decide that something is the loving thing to do, then that can be attributed to the Spirit. Yet that's not what the passage says at all. Whose version of love are we going to use to make these decisions?

What if the Spirit is actually leading us back to Scripture? People want to grant a great deal of leeway for interpreting where the Spirit is leading us, but they rarely grant that perhaps the Spirit is pointing us back to the Scriptures themselves. If it works one way, it would have to work the other.

Everyone has a standard. Is that standard wrapped up more in what we want or more in what is actually revealed as a product of the Spirit? Is it our will or God's will that we are really wanting to do?

What about our feelings?

Does the Holy Spirit produce feelings inside of us that guide us in some special way by giving us new information coupled with the knowledge that we are right?

If so, what passage teaches it? The way some speak, it often seems to be assumed. For example, I'll paraphrase the types of statements I've heard over the years: "I just feel that the Holy Spirit has led me here." "I just feel deep inside that God wants me to do this." "I just feel this is right, and it must be the Holy Spirit giving me this assurance."

How exactly do they know this? Am I suggesting that God *cannot* do this? No, I'm not about to put God in a box. Yet when we claim such feelings to be produced by the Holy Spirit, we are making claims that cannot be substantiated by God's revelation, which is the product of the Holy Spirit. He won't contradict Himself, and we cannot legitimately attribute to the Spirit what He has not attributed to Himself.

All that such claims will do is create confusion. How so? Have you talked with any Mormons lately? They know they are right because the Holy Spirit makes them feel it.

Have you spoken with any Pentecostals? How does the Holy Spirit make them feel based on their claims? The list can go on, so what is the difference? If we feel justified in claiming some special leading by the Spirit, and we base this upon special feelings that we have, then why can't they do the same? Televangelists do it every week, making claims in the name of what the Holy Spirit led them to do and say. Have we reached a point where we are willing to grant this as viable, especially in the absence of any biblical teaching to that effect? If so, then God's authority is a lost cause and we are just using His name to do our own bidding.

Am I saying that the Holy Spirit is irrelevant today? Of course not (see, for example, Rom. 8:26-27). What I am saying is that when we make claims about what the Holy Spirit is doing without biblical support, or talk about how He is leading us through our feelings, we are claiming more than Scripture claims. We are claiming more than the Holy Spirit has claimed for Himself.

Feelings just aren't that reliable, and we aren't saved based on those feelings. Yes, feelings flow from our salvation; I am not saying feelings are unimportant. However, salvation is still grounded in God's revelation. "He has told you, O man, what is good" (Mic. 6:8). We cannot substitute feelings for what God has told us.

The point is that God is not giving us new, authoritative information with our feelings. Feelings will trick us and betray us. Claiming special feelings as if God is giving us authority through them just does not comport with Scripture and will lead to multiple contradictory views about many subjects and actions.

Think about it. Let's be careful about what we are claiming on behalf of God. The devil has very clever ways of pulling the wool over our eyes, and feelings are always susceptible. Stay grounded in revealed truth.

Feelings Follow Revelation

The best source for understanding how the Holy Spirit actually works is ... the Holy Spirit. Since the Spirit is the mover behind the Scriptures (2 Peter 1:21), then the Scriptures must be respected in our understanding of what He reveals about Himself. The Spirit will not do something that contradicts Himself or His revelation. Therefore, when we assign works to the Spirit that the Spirit Himself never acknowledges as legitimate, then we are saying too much. We aren't speaking as the utterances of God (1 Pet. 4:11). We must be ever so careful.

Herein lies one of the dangers of allowing our feelings to take the lead and then attributing those feelings to the Spirit. The Bible warns strongly against deceptions (cf. Col. 2:8; 2 Cor. 11:14; 2 Thess. 2:10-12), and we know that our feelings are easily deceived. Yet, even in recognizing such warnings, it seems that we have a tough time avoiding the swinging pendulum.

Here is a paraphrased example of a pendulum-swinging type of response to this point: “If you say that our feelings shouldn’t take the lead any, then you are against feelings and your religion must be a dead one.”

To suggest a “feelings first or dead religion” type of argument would be a false dichotomy. Saying that our feelings should not be what lead us in serving God is not the same as saying that feelings play no part in our service at all. Of course we are to recognize the importance of our feelings and emotions, but those feelings need to follow the recognition of truth for one simple reason: our feelings can easily justify over-riding the truth of something. How many have we known who, because of their feelings, have denied plain Bible teaching? We are all susceptible to it if we don’t watch it.

Feelings are often happiness-based, not truth-based. We can be trapped into thinking that what God really wants for us is our happiness. That is true on one level, of course, but the next step with our feelings is this: we get to decide what should make us happy because happiness, in our minds, is all about how we feel. Before long, God has become a magic genie who is supposed to grant us our wishes and rubber-stamp our desires.

If we are to know about God’s concept of joy and happiness, then we must first consult His word, not our feelings. Once we know His revealed will, then we can work to train our feelings to be in line with that. We should not deny the feelings, but we should see those feelings as subservient to God’s revealed will. Then, upon our submission to His will:

- We can have the peace that passes understanding when we turn our anxieties over to Him (Phil. 4:6-7).
- We can have the joy deep down of knowing of our salvation as the outcome of our faith (1 Peter 1:8).
- We can claim the fruit of the Spirit as part of God’s promises because we have decided to walk by the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-25).

The feelings will follow the decision to follow the Lord, but the proper starting place for understanding God’s will, the Holy Spirit’s work, and the Lord’s way will always be what He has given for that very purpose. His word is the standard for our feelings. It will never work if we switch that around. Making how feel to be the standard for judging Scripture elevates us over God’s revelation. Can we honestly think this would be pleasing to God?

Can we Know God Works in our Lives?

We’ve been making the case that feelings are not the leading factor in understanding our relationship with God. While feelings properly follow, the truth revealed by the Holy Spirit must be the determining factor for understanding our relationship. Some may interpret this to mean that we cannot really know that the Spirit works in us, which does not follow. Just keep in mind:

- Feelings are easily deceived. We are warned multiple times in Scripture about deception.
- The Spirit will not contradict in action what He revealed in His own message.
- If feelings are the determining factor for truth, then we have no basis on which to deny others who claim their feelings are the basis of their knowledge, even when what they claim is contrary to what is revealed.

Does this mean that we cannot know that the Spirit is at work in us? The question is about knowledge, which means that we need to understand the source of that knowledge. If we say we feel a certain way, then talk ourselves into thinking that this feeling must be of the Holy Spirit, then we are opened up to all types of error. This approach is neither necessary nor helpful. In fact, it is divisive.

There was purpose in what the Holy Spirit revealed. One purpose is to give us a foundation for knowing God's will regardless of what our feelings tell us. If we start with His revelation, then we can know much more than what our feelings can ever give. As Paul said about his own salvation and being judged by others, "I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord" (1 Cor. 4:4). A feelings-based approach will result in self-justification. We need God's revelation on these matters.

Because of this, we *can* really know that God works in our lives primarily because He has told us that He works in our lives:

"So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:12-13).

"Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord, equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen" (Heb. 13:20-21).

These promises are independent of how we feel about them. Feelings will properly follow, but the feelings aren't what give us God's revelation and knowledge. We know God is at work in His people because 1) God said He does, and 2) God always keeps His word. That is a rock solid foundation for knowing that He works in us, and that should make us feel pretty good about our position. Yes, I just said that. Truth first, then feelings. Nowhere does God say that our feelings will determine the truth of these promises. Our first concern, then, need not be how we feel about something, but about being what God has called us to be.

Wait a minute! Didn't the Lord say that loving God was the greatest commandment? Yes, He did (Matt. 22:36-40). But where does the Bible teach that love—biblical love—is all

about our feelings? We are to love our neighbors, love our enemies, and love those whom we may “feel” don’t deserve it. Love is a choice (see the context of Deut. 6 where the way to demonstrate love for God was to do what He says), and we can choose to love God or reject Him. True love’s character is found in 1 Corinthians 13, which shows that feeling-based love only is shallow and superficial.

We aren’t saying that feelings are unimportant. We aren’t saying that our religion should be dead. We are saying that there is a proper order here, and it must begin with the revelation of the Holy Spirit who told us God’s will in these matters. Let’s get that straight first, and if our feelings contradict this, then let’s work on those feelings to bring them under subjection to Christ.

What about the Indwelling of the Spirit?

Scripture gives us enough information to know *that* God works in us and through us, but where does it explain exactly *how* God does all of this? Scripture tells us *that* the Holy Spirit indwells us, but where does it explain exactly *how* the Spirit does this? We need to be careful here because human speculations are not authoritative and often creating more problems than they can solve.

Some are convinced that feelings can accurately point the way, but feelings are not trustworthy as a guide to new information. Whether or not we feel a certain way, we can still be assured that God is at work in us by virtue of His promises (Phil. 2:12-13; Heb. 13:20-21). These promises are not dependent upon how we feel.

The source of our knowledge for what God does and how He does it are the Scriptures revealed by the Holy Spirit. If the Scriptures do not tell us how God does something, then our best option is simply to affirm what Scripture affirms and leave the rest up to God. The question is whether or not we can trust that He is doing what He said He will do. While our feelings can properly follow from our decision to trust, our feelings, which are often temperamental, will never change God’s promises.

We can know that the Holy Spirit indwells the Christian because we have His word on it (e.g., 1 Cor. 6:19-20; Eph. 1:14; 2:21). Working our feelings into some sort of frenzy and then claiming these feelings as the work of the Spirit is not something taught in Scripture, and many would have a hard time distinguishing this from the frenzied feelings we may get at a sporting event. We know He indwells, first, because we can trust His word. From that, we can experience the fruit of the Spirit and confirm God’s truth through our lives. Christians will manifest the fruit of the Spirit if they are walking in the Spirit — even when they don’t feel like it on given occasions. If we feel a bad mood coming on, are we justified in mistreating a brother in Christ? Are we justified to sin because of how we feel? Or should we rein in those feelings and treat others the way Christ has taught? We know the answer. Self-control of the will must prevail over the feelings. Yet the Spirit is still in us as we work through the difficult feelings to do what is right. The result will yet yield the fruit of the Spirit, and feelings will once again follow.

The importance and authority of the revealed word in this discussion must be continually affirmed. The word of God is the sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:17). We have been born again “through the living and enduring word of God” (1 Peter 1:23). The word is living, sharp, and active (Heb. 4:12), and the Spirit uses the instrumentality of the word. We cannot have the Spirit indwelling us if the word of God is not indwelling us (see Col. 3:16; James 1:21). Exactly *how* all of this happens is never fully explained. We simply need to trust what God has promised, what the Spirit has revealed, and be determined to do what the Lord teaches us to do.

Important to us practically are the implications and practices that grow out of the fact that the Spirit indwells the Christian. Paul asks and affirms, “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body” (1 Cor. 6:19-20). Because the Spirit indwells, we have a responsibility to glorify God with what is His.

God works in the Christian. The Spirit indwells the Christian. The word indwells the Christians. The Christian needs to trust this, appreciate it, and show the fruit of it. The way to know that the Spirit is with us is not to argue over how we feel about it all, but to walk according to the Spirit. As Paul indicates, if the Spirit makes us alive, then we need to walk by the Spirit. How so? “Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Gal. 5:24).

Led by the Spirit

“For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God” (Rom. 8:14).

How do we know we are being led by the Holy Spirit? Should our response be, “I just know because I feel it”? “I feel deep down in my heart this is true”? Or is there something more objective and concrete about what we can know?

A few years ago, I had a Bible study with a man and his wife who claimed that the Spirit guided them to the extent that He gave them what to say and when to say it. They claimed He gave them memory, as per John 14:26. They were inspired.

I have found that when people make these kinds of claims, usually if you wait long enough, the error will become awkwardly and painfully obvious. In this case, the man started to quote a passage. He stumbled, stammered, and butchered the passage. I reminded him that he had just told me that the Spirit gives him perfect memory and what to say. His wife pointed her finger at me and said, “Don’t blaspheme the Spirit.” I wasn’t the one blaspheming.

Being led by the Spirit is not about how we feel about something. If we are led by the Spirit, our feelings need to be brought under His subjection. To that end, the Spirit has

given us an objective standard by which we can know that we are following His lead. The context of Romans 8 is a contrast between walking by the flesh and walking by the Spirit. If we are truly being led by the Spirit, we will set our minds on the things of the Spirit, “for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Rom. 8:13). The “mind set on the Spirit” (vs. 6) will never ignore what the Spirit has revealed, for that is the only way we will know the mind of God (cf. 1 Cor. 2:10-13). The ones being led by the Spirit are the ones paying attention to His revelation. Feelings, again, will follow. Letting our feelings take the lead can put us in that dangerous position of being led by the flesh instead of the Spirit. As we all know, the flesh is often quite weak, and in our weakness, we are driven to justify ourselves.

This position is sometimes misunderstood for saying that the Spirit does nothing. On the contrary, we are recognizing that the Spirit not only works, but also has so infused His word with power that its impact will completely change us. The word works because the Spirit works. Consider what the writer of Hebrews said:

“For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do” (Heb. 4:12-13).

God’s word is living, active, powerful, sharp, and cuts to our very hearts. Why? Notice how verse 13 ties God into this message. The word is powerful precisely because it is God’s word. The word works because God works. Scripture is not a lifeless, antiquated piece of literature. What makes Scripture profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness is that it is inspired of God (2 Tim. 3:16-17). It is the message of the Spirit, who works in ways that we cannot fathom; God is able to do far more abundantly beyond anything we can ask or think (Eph. 3:20). To deny the power of His word is to deny the power of the Spirit to make His own communication do exactly what He intends (cf. Isa. 55:8-11).

The point is that if the word contains the will of God, the message of the Holy Spirit, then being led by the Spirit necessarily means that we are listening to this revealed will. No one who ignores Scripture can legitimately claim to be led by the Spirit.

We are left, once again, with the affirmation that our authority can only come from the proper source, and that source is not our feelings. Feelings will deceive us, betray us, and conflict with other feelings. Instead, the Spirit has borne witness to Himself that the word adequately reveals to us God’s mind. This is the one standard to which all may appeal.

Doy Moyer
Rev. Sept. 2016